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Obituary notice of Michel Chevalier. By Moncure Robinson.

(Read before the American Philosophical Society, May 7, 1880.)

I come before the Society for the first time for many years, in discharge of a duty devolved on me by you, the discharge of which revives in me many recollections both pleasant and painful. The eminent political economist and statesman of whom you have requested me to prepare an obituary notice, was not only a member of our Society, but one of my oldest and most attached friends, one whom I have known intimately for nearly half a century, and for whom my affection and admiration steadily increased, from the period of our first acquaintance, to the day of his death. It is not remarkable that it should have been so, for Mr. Chevalier was a man of heart, as well as head, whose whole life was devoted to the service of his country and his fellow men, and one who, whilst undemonstrative and apparently cold on a first acquaintance, was unusually benevolent and kind in his nature, and capable of the warmest attachments for those whom he thought possessors of, and appreciative of, such qualities.

You will be curious to know something of the early youth of such a man, and it is a gratification to me, to be able to give it to you, in some detail.

Mr. Chevalier was born at Limoges, *chef-lieu* of the department of the Haute Vienne, the 13th of January, 1806. He was the eldest son of Jean Baptiste Chevalier and of Marie Gurand, both natives of Limoges. They had four other sons, Auguste, Emile, Martial and Gustave, of whom the first three made their names known, both in their native country, and other lands; the first as Secretary General of the Presidency, in the days of the second Republic of France, from November, 1849 to 1853; the second as a highly educated and accomplished military and civil engineer, known to many of the citizens of Philadelphia more than forty years ago, when he commenced the practice of his profession as an assistant engineer, on the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, then under construction, and who has since continued this career both in Europe and America, and been occasionally occupied in missions of his government in England, and on the Isthmus of Panama; the third, Mr. Martial Chevalier of the French Consular Department, who was for several years (within the last ten) the Consul General of France, at Quebec, and afterwards at Havana. I had not the advantage of a personal acquaintance with the father of these gentlemen, who at the time that his distinguished son, Mr. Michel Chevalier was making the name an honored one throughout the world, was only a small *commerçant* at Limoges, and confined there constantly by his occupations; but I had the pleasure, during a visit to France in 1837, of seeing often the mother of Mr. Michel Chevalier, and his devoted sister Pauline (afterwards Madame Moroche), and I then learned the secret of his rapid rise in public estimation as a writer and statesman. But I am proceeding too rapidly, and must go back a little, and redeem my promise to tell you something of an earlier period.

The boy Michel Chevalier entered as a boarding pupil the College of

Limoges, at the age of eleven, and made the most brilliant progress in his studies. He bore off nearly all the prizes in his classes, from the day of his entrance in this institution. He was equally distinguished in both the literary and scientific classes, but most remarked on, for his attainments in mathematical science. His taste and aptitude for the last, enabled him to undergo earlier than usual, the examination for the Polytechnic School at Paris, which he entered in the month of November, 1823, at the age of 17, one of the first in the list of candidates for admission of that year. At the end of 1825, he left the Polytechnic School, equally remarkable for his attainments in it, as at the Lycée of Limoges, to enter as *Elève Ingénieur* in the School of Mines. In 1829, he obtained his degree of Engineer of Mines, and was sent as Resident Engineer to the important department of Valenciennes.

Had the ambition of Mr. Chevalier been only professional, he would, with this starting point, have probably been like his distinguished contemporary, Mr. Le Play (the Commissioner-in-Chief of the Great Paris Exposition of 1867), at an early age, one of the eminent members of the profession of Mining engineers in Europe; but his reading and researches both in the Polytechnic School and School of Mines, in Paris, had gone far beyond the curriculum of studies in those institutions, comprehensive as that was, and including as it did every thing pertaining to the subjects taught in them. The quick intellect and remarkable memory of Mr. Chevalier enabled him, during the six years of study at these grand institutions, the chairs of which were then filled by world-renowned names, to spare time for outside reading and research, as well as the preservation of the early classical lore and polite learning imbibed by him at the Lyceum of Limoges; and his tastes were for everything useful and ornamental to our race, but especially for the useful, and what would add to the comforts of and elevate the masses.

The revolution which dethroned Charles X. and made Louis Philippe King of the French, which, in the language of General Lafayette, "made France a Monarchy with republican institutions," took place in the following year (1830): Many now living among us must recollect the excitement throughout the civilized world, which followed this change. It was naturally excessive in France, and it is not remarkable that at such a time minds of the highest order with corresponding aspirations, were most profoundly agitated. Mr. Chevalier in his various reading had been attracted by the writings and doctrines of St. Simon, in which at the commencement there was much to attract, as well as to find fault with. There was nothing like communism in them, but the reverse. The leading maxim of St. Simon was, "*To every one according to capacity, and to every capacity according to its works,*" and it is not surprising with such a motto on its banner, that St. Simonism should have found among its votaries, young minds of the highest ability and culture, and especially those who, like Mr. Chevalier, believed that the advancement of France in wealth and prosperity, would be greatly and rapidly promoted by improved lines of communication, especially by a well-arranged system of railroads, and more freedom of trade than existed previous to the revolution of 1830.

So it was, that Mr. Chevalier and other distinguished pupils of the Polytechnic School, and the Schools of Bridges and Highways, and Mines, became in 1830 St. Simonians, and he one of the leaders of the sect and editor of the *Globe*, its organ, until its suppression by the government in 1832, when Mr. Michel Chevalier as its *Redacteur-en-Chef*, was condemned to imprisonment for a year, from which he was released at the expiration of six months, and immediately appointed by Mr. Thiers, then Minister of Public Works (who had not forgotten in the St. Simonian, the young and talented Engineer of Mines of the Department of the North), to visit the United States, to inquire minutely as to its canals and railroads, and the financial and banking systems, both of the States and the General Government.

In this mission, including a visit of a few months to Mexico, Mr. Chevalier occupied about two years in 1833, '34 and '35; and during his travels in the United States, he addressed to the *Journal Des Debats*, from different points on his route, frequent letters, beautifully written, exhibiting large reflection, both on the subjects of his mission, and others of equal interest, and indicating with great tact many industrial hindrances in his native country, which he considered burdensome. These letters, with some slight changes, were published in 1836, in two octavo volumes, and gained him immediately the spontaneous plaudits of eminent men of both continents, and a high reputation among the writers and thinkers of Europe. Mr. Gallatin said of them that they were the most graphic and truest view of the social condition of the United States; and the great Humboldt wrote to him that his book might be considered a treatise on the civilization of the people of the West. He was indebted to this work for an appointment by the French government on a mission to England, in 1837, to study there, the causes and effects of the commercial crisis, which commencing in the United States at the close of 1836 had extended to England in 1837. This mission proved an unfortunate one for him. A few days after his arrival in London, in returning from a session of Parliament with Mr. Bourqueney, the then Chargé d'Affaires of France to England, in the carriage of the latter, the horses ran away and upset the carriage. Mr. Bourqueney was but slightly injured by the accident, but Mr. Chevalier having fallen on his head, was taken at once to the house of the French Minister, was for several days insensible, and his life for some weeks in serious peril; and it was only after passing several months in the south of France, and at the Pyrenean Baths, that his health was sufficiently re-established to admit of his resuming his labors.

At the expiration of a year from his recovery, near the close of 1838, he published his celebrated work, entitled "*The Material Interests of France, its Roads, Canals, and Railroads.*" This work was, to a great extent, a programme of ameliorations, many of them suggested by him, soon to take place, and which made the France of 1850 scarcely recognizable by travelers who had known well the France of 1840.

Such had been the brilliant and useful career, and such was the position

of Mr. Chevalier in the winter of 1838-39, when he was scarcely thirty-three years of age. Honors and distinctions were then bestowed on him rapidly. Appointed "Master of Requests" in 1836, he became successively Counsellor of State, member of the Superior Council of Commerce, Chief Engineer of Mines, and in 1841, at the age of 35, successor of the celebrated Rossi, as Professor of Political Economy in the College of France. No appointment could have been more gratifying to Mr. Chevalier than this. His lectures were to be on subjects familiar to him, to which his thoughts had been given from the time of his entrance in the Polytechnic School, and it was a labor of love to him to prepare and deliver them. Though the recipient since of many distinctions and honors, among them that of Senator of France in 1860, and charged with corresponding duties, and obliged occasionally to devolve on a substitute his duties as professor, he continued to hold the Professorship of Political Economy, in the College of France until his death, with the exception of a brief period after the Revolution of 1848, when he was deprived of his chair by the Provisional government of the day, but which was restored to him in the course of a few months by a vote of the National Assembly.

Mr. Chevalier, though eminent as a Political Economist and Publicist, and zealous always in promoting what he believed to be the interests of his country, was in no sense a party man. He was an admirer of Mr. Thiers, and an attached friend of Count Molé, successive Ministers of Louis Philippe, but he had no difficulty in opposing important measures recommended by them as Ministers, of which he did not approve; and he manifested signally in 1870 his independence when he stood in the Senate Chamber almost, if not altogether alone, in voting against the Prussian War. When in France in 1867, on hearing his name mentioned as a man of pre-eminent ability by a gentleman of influence in the Orleanist Party, and bearing one of the renowned names of France, I was tempted to ask how it came to pass that Mr. Chevalier had not been in the Cabinet of either Louis Philippe or Louis Napoleon. His reply was simply "*Il traverse trop son chemin*," showing that in Empires and Monarchies, as in the United States, those who would be cabinet officers and dispensers of government patronage, must give up to a greater or less extent their independence of opinion, which conscientious and really able men cannot readily surrender.

Mr. Chevalier was elected in 1845 a Deputy of the Department of the Aveyron, and during the same year was married to Mlle. Emma Fournier, a highly educated and accomplished young lady, the only daughter of a large and wealthy manufacturer of Lodève in the Department of the Herault; and in 1851 he was elected a member of the Institute of France, in the Department of Moral and Political Sciences.

He had thus attained at the age of 45, all that, if a selfish or merely ambitious man, he could have desired. With an ample income from the honorable positions held by him, and occasional contributions of his well-considered views, on subjects of public interest, to the regular periodicals and

daily press of Paris, and his excellent wife (as the future proved her to be) the almost certain inheritor of a large estate, there was every temptation to him, laboring as he did under the disadvantage of a very delicate constitution, to spare himself in the future; but his mind and heart were of that order which considers nothing done whilst anything remains to be done, for his country and humanity; and he regarded the advantages attained by him in the prime of life, only as stepping stones to increased usefulness.

In 1852, as Counsellor of State, Mr. Chevalier was placed in the section of Public Works.

In 1855, he acted as President of the French section of the World's Exposition of that year in Paris; and for the ten years between 1860, in which year, as above observed, he was made Senator, to 1870, when the Empire ceased to exist, he took an important part in all discussions, in and out of the Senate, pertaining to financial and industrial questions. The most signal and important service rendered by him to his country during this period, was the commercial treaty of 1860 between France and England. Of this treaty, his son-in-law, Mr. Paul Leroy Beaulieu, a member of the Institute, and the distinguished *Rédacteur-en-Chef* of the *Economiste Français*, in the number of that Journal of the 6th of December last, says:

“The conception of the treaty of 1860 was due entirely to Mr. Michel Chevalier. It was he who of his own sole motion, without any official mission, went to England to see Cobden and Bright, to propose to them an arrangement in this way. Cobden had at first some hesitations. A treaty of commerce appeared to him a *compromise*, contrary to true economical doctrines. Mr. Michel Chevalier converted him, and then addressed himself to Mr. Gladstone. Assured of the coöperation of the English Government, Mr. Chevalier then returned to France, explained his views to the Emperor, and obtained his support of them. Several of the Ministers of that date were nevertheless opposed to a step so decisive in the way of commercial liberty, but Mr. Rouher comprehended the great usefulness and productiveness of the projected treaty of Mr. Chevalier. Thus this great work, the treaty of 1860, which marks a new evolution in the economical relations of nations, was in its principles, as well as its initiation, a private one due to the inspiration of Michel Chevalier and the adhesion of Richard Cobden. Nearly twenty years have passed upon the treaty of 1860, twenty years which will be counted as among the most agitated of History. The War of Secession of the United States, the War of 1866, the French and German War, have disturbed the conditions of the experiment of commercial liberty. Nevertheless, in spite of all these disturbing elements, all the losses of capital, and all the uncertainties which have during this period been the consequence of these great international conflicts, the reform of 1860 has proved to be a beneficent one; it has been so to such an extent, that though this treaty has been denounced for nearly ten years, nothing has yet been found to substitute it. It has been prorogued from year to year without the power, without

“daring to modify it. What might have been its results, had the experiment been made in a period of peace, like that between 1815 and 1848?”

It was certainly due to this treaty which had been so effective during the previous ten years, in connection with her admirable system of railroads in developing her resources and increasing her wealth, that France was enabled to recover so rapidly from the results of the Prussian War, and to exhibit before the end of the next ten years, a picture of prosperity surpassed by that of no other country in Europe.

The above extract from the *Economiste Français* reminds me of a misapprehension in this country of the views of Mr. Chevalier on the subject of free trade, which I will avail myself of this opportunity to correct. The visit of Mr. Chevalier to the United States in 1833, had the effect of modifying very materially his views on many subjects. Previous to this visit, I think it not unlikely that the great, and in many cases, absurd, hindrances in France in the way of exchanges, both at home and with other countries, may have caused him to have entertained extreme free trade views; but Mr. Chevalier was a man of profound reflection, aiming at truth on that and every other subject to which his thoughts were directed, and eminently practical in his conclusions. After his return to France in 1835, the subject which first occupied his attention more than any other, was that of improved communications by *canals and railroads*, and it has been most fortunate for his country, that the programme of these given in his great work published in 1838, on “*The Material Interests of France*,” was so closely followed. He abhorred the idea of allowing free competition to the extent admitted in England as well as in America in canals and railroads, believing the plan of giving an act of incorporation for either, to any association asking it, as not only permitting an unnecessary waste of the capital of the country, to an immense extent, and destructive of confidence in such investments, but as impairing the power of really valuable works to provide such accommodations for the public at fair rates, as they could otherwise afford, and as it would be to their interest to give, as well as the policy of the government to require. He believed, in short, in the right of eminent domain being used only in the case of improvements of decided value, and when used, in the rights of the public, being in all cases carefully guarded, and the accommodations of the improvement afforded at the lowest charges consistent with a fair remuneration to its owners; objects which could not be united under a system of free competition. As a consequence of the adoption of these views by his countrymen, there is no country in the world where so small a proportion of the capital invested within the last forty years in canals and railroads, has been wasted, or where traveling is safer, or in which travel and trade are accommodated, at more reasonable rates than in France.

It was impossible for one entertaining such views in regard to improved communications to be a *reckless* free-trader; and Mr. Chevalier, I have reason to believe, was on the subject of international commerce as conservative in his views, as he was in regard to railroads and canals. He believed

in the adoption of protective duties to a moderate extent for nascent industries, as in a patent-right or a copy-right for a limited time, for the protection of an author or inventor, and in the propriety of such duties as might be necessary to keep up a few industries essential to the defence of a country in time of war ; but beyond this, he considered the protection given by a tariff based on revenue principles, all that was justifiable or judicious. Practical as he was in all things, I have little doubt that his preference for an arrangement *by a treaty* between England and France, instead of the action of the legislative bodies of the two countries, was founded on the idea that what was advisable in the way of protection for each country, might best be effected by treaty.

Mr. Chevalier's connection with governmental affairs ceased with the Empire in 1870, and he consecrated himself for some time afterwards, to his duties as Professor in the College of France, and as member of the Institute ; but his taste for great and useful enterprises continued, and he devoted himself in 1875, with his accustomed zeal, to carrying out one of his engineering conceptions, that of a submarine railroad between Calais and Dover, as a means of binding together more closely France and England. He organized during this year a society for the purpose of making examinations in reference to the work, of which the Messrs. Rothschild Brothers, and the railroad companies of the North, were members. This Society, of which he was the initiator, and of which he continued until his death the President, obtained of the government a concession of the submarine railroad, and Mr. Chevalier entered on the examination of the bed of the Channel, and an ascertainment of the strata underneath, with that ardor and perseverance which were parts of his nature. He had communicated with me as an old friend and confrère, when he first conceived the idea of the work, as to its practicability, and sent me, from time to time, lithographed copies of the soundings, and statements as to the character of the chalk formations, found at various depths below the level of the sea, on the line of the tunnel on both sides of the Channel, which up to the time of his death, were highly favorable. But the events in the East, and the condition of things in England within the last three years, have prevented, so far, the work itself being entered on, and it may not for some time, or perhaps never, be executed ; but if it should be, the name of Mr. Chevalier will be always connected with it, as its first projector and promoter.

This and other plans for the benefit of his country and the world, occupied, I might say, to the last moments of his life, the thoughts of Mr. Chevalier. I speak knowingly on the subject, having been a recipient during his last and fatal illness (after it had progressed to the point that he could write only in a recumbent posture), of eight letters in less than six weeks, in which the submarine tunnel, and other subjects of public concern, were referred to, and discussed by him. In one of them, he speaks of an experiment he is making on his estate in the South of France, of growing American grape vines for the purpose of engrafting French grape vines on American stocks, as a means of arresting the *Phylloxera*, at present so destructive to the great wine industry of France ; and I find from

the obituary notice of Mr. Paul Leroy Beaulieu in the *Economiste Français*, from which I have made an extract on a previous page, that from his bed of suffering on the evening preceding the day of his death, he directed, as President, a letter to the submarine railroad association, so impossible it was for him to avoid thinking (or acting) on subjects which interested him !

The life and labors of Mr. Chevalier ended on the 28th of November last. He died the morning of that day, at his country residence, Mont Plaisir, near Lodève, in his 74th year, which would have been reached on the 13th of January of the present year.

I venture to translate from a letter from his affectionate and lovely daughter, Madame Paul Leroy Beaulieu, written me on the 2d of December, four days later, the portion communicating the sad intelligence of his death. "When (says Madame Beaulieu) my father received your last letter, he was already confined to his bed, from which he was no more to rise. His ankle was being rapidly cured, but as the cure of the ankle progressed, there came on successively a rheum, derangement of the stomach, and afters in the mouth, all ills which under other circumstance would easily have been borne, but which were too much for a frame for some years enfeebled.

"My poor father died on the 28th of November, after four weeks of suffering, and an agony of twenty-six hours. He preserved his consciousness until within a few hours of his death.

"All the physicians whom we have consulted, concur in opinion that his health had been *used up* by his labors ; and, in spite of all the watchful care which surrounded him, especially that of my mother, who never left him night or day for more than two years, the Almighty has not allowed us to preserve him.

"I have thought, dear sir, that these details in regard to so old and sincere a friend, would be of interest to you, and for this reason I have written you.

"I wish also to say to you that all those whom my father has loved are dear to us, and that we will be happy to learn that the painful trials we are undergoing, have been spared to them."

Mr. Chevalier's life was in fact one of almost constant mental labor, from his childhood to his death. This was so much his normal condition, that even at his hospitable home, he appeared often *distracted* and silent when thinking over something said by a guest which struck him as worthy of consideration, but in regard to which he was not at the moment prepared to express his concurrence, or dissent. That he was not unobservant, was evident from his accurate and minute recollection of men and things. He had one of the most retentive memories I have ever known, and seldom, I think, forgot anything he had seen or read, worthy of thought or remembrance.

With such varied ability, and such a taste for, and power of, labor, few subjects worthy of it escaped his attention, or were left, if within his purview, untouched by his pen. In one respect he was exceptional, and

perhaps stood alone, among the writers of his epoch. This was his rare union of a mind eminently scientific, with a beautiful imagination. This combination of what are usually deemed opposite mental traits, is apparent frequently in his writings, but is perhaps most apparent in his letters on North America, and in a smaller work published in 1863, on "Ancient and Modern Mexico."

With so quick an intellect, so fine a memory, and love of and capacity for labor, a great deal was written by Mr. Chevalier during the last half century, besides the works mentioned in this memoir. Independently of his letters from America which first attracted attention to him as a writer, he published in 1840, a large work on the "Lines of Communication and Public Works of the United States," with an accompanying atlas (two volumes in quarto and the atlas in folio), which has never been translated in English, but which made the internal improvements of the United States, at that time, better and more accurately known to Europeans than they were to ourselves. His lectures at the College of France and other works on Political Economy, and his brochures on Gold and Currency, are well known to readers on those subjects. In addition, he gave to the world a magnificent introduction to the reports of the International Exposition of 1867, and was a co-laborer during the whole period in the principal periodical journals of France, as well as a contributor of able articles on subjects of the day to the *Journal Des Debats*.

On the 1st page of this memoir, I mentioned having had "the pleasure during a visit to France in 1837, of seeing the mother of Mr. Chevalier, and his devoted sister Pauline (afterwards Madame Moroche) and learned then the secret of his rapid rise in public estimation, both as a writer and statesman."

Mr. Chevalier and myself were in Paris, students of our respective professions, in the years 1825, 1826, and 1827, but did not meet there at that time. Our acquaintance commenced when he visited this country on his mission from Mr. Thiers in 1833. He then brought me a letter from one of our Paris cotemporaries, asking my assistance to him in his objects, which it gave me pleasure to render. The more I saw of him the more interesting I found him, and when he left America to return to France in 1835, we had become attached friends. When I afterwards visited Paris in 1837, he was one of the first persons to call on me, and I was made literally at home, whenever I could spare time to visit him, in his modest apartment, I forget the street, and number; but it was not far from mine, which was at the Hotel de Londres in the Place Vendome.

Instead of the *appartement de garçon* in which I had expected to find my friend, I found his remarkable mother, and his sister Pauline and young brother Martial, residing with him; the two first, to relieve him of the trouble of taking care of himself, and thereby leave him more time for his studies and labors, as well as to make his time more pleasant in the brief intervals he allowed himself for recreation; and the younger brother brought with them to have, under the guardianship of his mother and sister, the advantages of Paris training without its perils.

Cordially received as I always was by every member of this little household, I soon discovered in the gentle, affectionate and unpretending mother of the Chevaliers, a lady of remarkable mind and energy, whose ambition it was to make every sacrifice, and to do everything in her power to forward the honorable aspirations of her sons, and especially of Mr. Michel Chevalier the eldest.

I had a few months later, on the occasion of his dangerous accident at London, a proof of the devotion of his young sister Pauline. Mr. Chevalier and myself occupied at the time of its occurrence a common parlor with adjoining chambers at Long's Hotel. How the news of the accident reached Paris so soon, I have never known. Electric telegraphs had not been introduced to any extent, and the only roads which then existed between Paris and London were the French paved turnpikes and English McAdamized roads; but on the third or fourth night after its occurrence [a shorter time than a reply to my letter to the family announcing it could have been received by me], I was awakened at 4 A. M. by a loud knocking at the door of my chamber, which proved to be from Mlle Pauline and her brother Auguste, who on hearing of the accident, rushed to London as fast as the *Malle-poste* in France and post-horses in England could carry them, to nurse their brother Michel; and who, after hearing my account of it, went at once to the French Embassy, and remained there constantly with him, until he could be removed without hazard, to Paris.

One can scarcely imagine surroundings more favorable to high development in an elevated and affectionate nature, than were those of Mr. Chevalier in his modest Paris apartment, of which I have given a glimpse only, in the above paragraphs.

Before closing this obituary notice, I should say a few words of Mr. Chevalier in private life. I have never known more beautiful family relations than those which existed in his household. But the extract from the letter of Madame Leroy Beaulieu given in this, brief as it is, tells what these were, better than anything which I could say on the subject. Few persons, I think, knew or understood Mr. Chevalier better than myself, and I can truly say that his nature was a most kindly and affectionate one to everybody; but no one could surpass him in his willingness, however occupied, to aid and assist young men desiring his counsel and advice in the opening of their careers. On this subject, I recollect hearing his excellent mother-in-law, Madame Fournier, complain of his good-heartedness in being willing, notwithstanding his unremitting labors, to give his time and advice, as well as pecuniary aid, to any one asking his assistance or counsel; and through life he enjoyed the reputation of unusual benevolence. In the language of Mr. Paul Leroy Beaulieu, from whom I have several times quoted in this notice, he looked usually at the best side both in men and things. He believed in Providence, in the definitive triumph of the good and true. His mind thus anchored, manifested increased resources under exigencies, and he found himself preserved under the most difficult circumstances from all discouragement.